

No winter shall abate the spring's increase

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No winter shall abate the spring's increase

by [middlemarch](#)

Summary

The return of mortality to Two Summoners.

Or,

When two people love each other very much...

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Genya was the first to notice.

It was winter and snow fell outside the Little Palace, sometimes in a fury, other days and nights as if a lover showered his lady with blossoms. Within the Little Palace, the Grisha were busy practicing and teaching, David creating ever more intricate items, weapons and tools and some things that were neither; there were missives read and replied to, meetings of the council, breakfasts of herring and rye and stewed, spiced fruit because Alina felt the authentic cuisine was authentic enough. There was a general sense of warmth, of camaraderie, jests instead of taunts, admiration in place of the endless jockeying. Zoya praised her peers without the usual scorpion's sting hidden in the words and Ivan was only firm where he'd been harshly demanding. Fedyor beamed as brightly as if he were the Sun Alina summoned.

Genya was the first to notice the change.

"Lady Kirigana, may I—"

"I'm still Alina, Genya."

"Alina, are you feeling well?" Genya asked.

"Yes," she said. "Well, I have been a little tired lately and I think I'd be happy to never see another piece of smoked herring again, but I think it's just the winter. And the herring."

"I wonder—" Genya said.

"I've never known you to wonder. To speculate and investigate, yes. Wonder, no," Alina smiled. "You may as well say what you are thinking."

"I haven't had to send your cloths to the laundress for three months, you haven't bled," Genya said and Alina grew very still. "Do you think, are you with child?"

"I can't be—"

"Why not? You made the marriage of two keftas—was that the last time you shared a bed?" Genya asked, her practical tone a balm. It was not the mechanics of conception that made Alina feel shy in front of her friend, but the invocation of the intimacy she shared with Aleksander, the private world they had created in their quarters, within the curtained bed, made from merzost and trust.

"No," Alina said. "But he said, suggested really, that it wouldn't be possible—"

"I have two questions for you," Genya interrupted. "Do you want it to be?"

"If I were, he would be so—"

“Do you want it to be?” Genya repeated softly. “Forget merzost for a minute, don’t shake your head at me about that—do you want a child? Because that is the only question that needs to be answered and you are the only one to answer it. And I may be overstepping here, but I think Lord Kirigan would agree with me, but you wouldn’t listen to him the way you listen to me.”

“I don’t know if I ever imagined having a family,” Alina said. “Friends, that’s one thing, but my own family?”

“You didn’t imagine the marriage of the two keftas either, I’d bet,” Genya said. “When you imagine it, is it just you and Lord Kirigan?”

Alina didn’t have to close her eyes to see the images, a small child reaching out her arms to be picked up, clapping her hands in delight, frowning when a pile of blocks toppled over; every time, the child had Aleksander’s dark eyes with the hint of Alina’s Shu heritage in their shape. Every time, a piping voice was calling out *Madraya* and she was answering.

“No,” she said. “I would like a child. You said you had another question?”

“Why did you think it was impossible?” Genya asked. “Is it because of merzost?”

“You know, Genya. You know I can’t speak of that,” Alina said.

“You can’t speak of it to me. But when he asks you, it won’t be the same answer,” Genya said. “That’s why I asked. Because he will and you’ll want something to say.”

“I will if it’s true,” Alina said. “I don’t want to go to a Healer though, nor an otkazat’sya midwife.”

“I think I can help,” Genya said. “Tailoring is simply a way of being a Fabrikator. It’s not all that I can do. Can make. David will let me visit his workshop—he gets so abstracted, he’ll agree to let me...fiddle with bits and pieces if he’s in the middle of something. I created a device, one that allows a woman to know, without anyone else touching her. Seeing her.”

“That’s very clever of you,” Alina said.

“I had good reason to want something like that, it wasn’t cleverness,” Genya said. Alina reached out her hand and took hold of Genya’s, not saying anything for a long moment. Letting Genya be the one to speak next. “I’m glad there’s another reason for it now. Shall I fetch the device?”

“Yes. Please,” Alina said.

“I’ll tell you how to use it and then give you some privacy. The answer is yours to share when and with whom you will,” Genya said.

“You will be one of the first to know, my friend,” Alina said.

“That will be soon enough for me,” she said.

Chapter 2

The device Genya had constructed was intricate, elegant and definitive; within a quarter of an hour and after shedding only a few drops of blood, Alina knew. She was pregnant. She felt almost like she had when Aleksander had cut her with his ring and light flooded the dark interior of his tent, baffled and amazed and uncertain. Changed. To be Grisha was something she had once feared and then never imagined she could be; to have a child was the inverse, once unimaginable for a frail, lonely orphan, and now fearful for the summoner who had been told it was magic she could not work but had. How? She could not envision telling Aleksander about the real possibility they would welcome a baby without understanding how it had come to pass.

He'd told her, a few days after they'd married, that it was extremely unlikely they could conceive a child together. He had lived several lifetimes before Alina's own parents had been born and not one of the women he'd coupled with had every been brought to bed of a healthy baby. That was how he'd said it, brought to bed, an old-fashioned phrase she might have read in a musty book; he was careful to match his language to the times when he was with others but the closer they'd become, the more the outmoded or archaic words peppered his speech, just as she might hear the accent of a Ravka long-gone when he spoke to her in their marriage-bed, the curtains drawn against the cold night. He'd been worried, at first, that she would feel it created some chasm between them, time pushing them apart like the Unsea itself, but it had done the opposite, letting her know the Aleksander he'd been, those younger selves she could never meet but harbored such a tenderness for. When she'd said that, he'd laughed and caught her up in his arms and kissed her face a dozen times, giddy and then serious, but that was not when she had gotten pregnant.

Genya had reminded her it had been three months since she'd bled. Before becoming aware of her power, her cycle had been irregular at best, scant for all that she suffered with cramps impervious to any of Ana Kuya's decoctions. Summoning had improved her appetite, her sleep, and every aspect of her health; she had been able to expect her bleeding and the manage the milder pain, but it not been reliable long enough for her to notice its absence after she began to share Aleksander's bed. She could not have been pregnant long enough to have quickened, but there was still no good way to know when she'd conceived. Or rather, no good way using her physical symptoms. She could only surmise that it had been something to do with their summoning abilities, something to do with the marriage of two keftas and merzost that had led to her pregnancy; the only way she could learn more would be to return to the books she'd found that had allowed them to marry and bind their powers in one ritual.

She had discovered no writing more conclusive than Hildur's. Unlike Ilya Morozova, her conceptualization of merzost was not based in sacrifice and diminishment, but in wonder, in covenant and balance. She wrote of marvels and awe, in matters great and small, in the general longing of light for dark and dark for light, the joy to be found in giving that was not loss and receiving that was not theft. It was apparent that some of her conclusions had been drawn from the observation of nature in its minutest aspects and others from trance, at times entered into through herbs and elementals, at times simply through sleep's ordinary door. When Alina read that passage a second time and then a third, she understood what had

happened and when. When she closed the book, she smiled and tucked it away onto the shelf in such a way that only someone seeking would find it, but no one who needed it could fail to discover it. She returned to her favorite table in the Library to consider what she would say to Aleksander. She might have gone anywhere but this was the same spot where she'd decided they must make the marriage of the two keftas and the same shaft of sunlight, sparkling with dust motes, pooled at her feet. She was not much given to omens, but it was beautiful and the symbolism was amusingly apt.

Chapter 3

Once she had decided what to say, she thought it would be simple enough. She only needed to find a private place and time enough for them to remain undisturbed; Ivan continued to protect the sanctity of their quarters as if he defended the last bastion of all Ravka's hopes and the winter nights were long, the velvet curtains on their bed snug. And yet, it seemed it would be impossible.

She didn't want to frighten Aleksander by asking him to set aside time to talk about something important. She knew him well enough to know she risked the creation of a second Fold if he thought there was anything or anyone troubling her and even if he managed to keep from any outward display of distress, he would be caught between feverish anxiety and brooding dread. After a week of false starts and interruptions, from the mundane complaints of the Little Palace chef to a series of possible international diplomatic debacles at the Ravkan embassy in Fjerda, Alina found that relying on serendipity to provide the right opportunity wasn't panning out. After Aleksander called out that he'd miss dinner over the Fjerdan situation but would certainly be back before she fell asleep, she decided to stop waiting for the best time and simply chose the next.

"Sasha, do you remember what you told me after we married?" she said, fussing with the end of her night-plait.

"That I loved you, body and soul," he said, reaching over to take her hand in his. "I did and I do, so very much."

"You're wrong. You were wrong," she said, striving to suffuse her tone with some of her light.

"That's rare enough," he said. "Shall you correct me then, Lady?"

"You said, I accept the marriage, I accept you," she answered. He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it.

"You're right. Though I meant the other part as well," he replied. "How else was I wrong, milaya? I can see you haven't said everything yet—"

"About us, about what could be, what couldn't," she said.

"I would give you the world, Lady, I would give you your heart's desire, if I could," he said. "I've seen you look at the little ones, I'm so sorry—"

"You have given me my heart's every desire," Alina said, feeling Aleksander grow still beside her, his dark eyes wide.

"But merzost—I don't understand how—"

"It was the night of the dreaming," she said softly. "Remember?"

“Oh, yes,” he said, his voice low, with the wonderful silky darkness of a starless midnight. “I remember.”

They had fallen asleep in their usual fashion, Alina with her head upon Aleksander’s bare chest, the eiderdown tucked around them both, but they’d shifted and when they woke, his chest was pressed against her back, his arms wrapped around her and her night-plait had come undone, her hair loose over her shoulders, both of them dreaming, both of them aware they had woven the night together. He reached one hand up to sweep her hair to the side, kissing her shoulder where her shift had slipped and the curve of her neck, whispering in her ear in Ravkan so old she only caught a few words *beautiful* and *beloved*, *want* and *joy*. *Joy of my joy*, he whispered, his lips soft beneath her jaw and at her cheek and then on hers as she turned her head, his lips still soft on hers. She tasted him and shifted, feeling his hands moving to the hem of her muslin shift, raising it to stroke her thigh and sigh into her mouth, shadows falling around them like petals from a dark blossom, light weaving between them like meadowsweet, until she murmured more Sasha more, her tongue in his mouth, his hips rocking against hers. *Joy of my joy* he repeated, his cock moving inside her quim, confident, seeking her pleasure, her cries, his hands at her waist, a hand slipped to rest low on her belly.

When they woke, they were close, striving together, the rapturous dream they knew had shared still shared between their waking souls; in a moment of grace, she withdrew and returned to him, facing him, drawing him down into her embrace. *Joy of my joy* she said and *I’m sure* and *oh Sasha yes yes* and there, her hands at the small of his back, her lips moving against his throat, licking the beat of his pulse, arching to bring him deeper, watching him become limned with the rich gold light of midsummer, watching him see his shadows in her loosened hair, in her dark, welcoming eyes, the shadow at the base of her throat, between her breasts, nestled between her thighs. *Joy of my joy* he muttered as he spent, ecstatic, and *Beloved* she answered as she came, ardent, the only light between them, the only shadow there, the rest of the room ordinary, the eiderdown rumpled, the nearly silent ticking of the clock David had made them breaching the drawn bed-curtains.

“You’re saying this is magic,” Aleksander offered. “That you have conceived.”

“No, there were no spells cast, no manipulation,” she answered. “And yes, of course it is magic that our dreaming souls met, found the incantation that drew forth life from us.”

“Joy of my joy,” Aleksander said.

“Exactly,” Alina said. “I’m very nearly certain and I spent hours in the library reading and re-reading the texts. Whatever it costs us, we have given more than enough to each other. No further sacrifices are required beyond the ordinary. Our sleep, our peace, the cleanliness of our keftas.”

“And if you are wrong?” he said, his brow furrowed, his right hand clenched in a fist.

“Then it is simply nature finding her way or luck, a blessing we could not have anticipated,” Alina said. “It *is* a blessing, yes? I thought you would find it so but—”

“Oh, yes. It is,” he said. “And you are sure? You are well?”

“Fedyor has commented three times this week on how very well indeed I am, each time with a bigger smile. Every time he says indeed with a little more emphasis,” Alina said. “I feel well enough. I feel like every other pregnant woman might, a little tired, a little queasy. Loathing that herring you insist upon, wishing for preserved lemons and apricot custard.”

“Then you shall have preserved lemons and apricot custard, milaya,” he said.

“I may not like them when I have them,” she warned.

“Then they’ll be taken away from your sight immediately,” he said.

“I shall have to be careful not to be spoiled,” she said. “Or perhaps I should just enjoy myself for the next several months.”

“When?” he asked, reaching to touch her cheek, to brush back a loose tendril that had escaped from her braid. She had never seen such a look in his eyes, so much hope, such encompassing gentleness.

“Springtime,” she said. “When the irises bloom.”

End Notes

Title from John Donne.

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